

Regional Development and Sustainability Committee

Earthquake Briefing Series

Tuesday, September 20th, 2011

Community “Hubs” Initiative

Mark Howard, Seattle Office of Emergency Management

Community Preparedness Overview

If Seattle were to experience a disaster similar to the earthquakes in Haiti, Chile, New Zealand and Japan, the City’s response capabilities are likely to be overwhelmed in the first few days. Day-to-day basic services may no longer be available and normal modes of communications will not be functional, meaning that community members will need to rely on each other for extended periods of time until these services are restored. This mutual reliance will be needed between immediate neighbors as well as at the larger community level. Also, with this level of disaster, we will have individuals who step forward to “Help” and those who “Need Help”. By preparing at the community level, we can develop plans to bring neighborhood people and resources together to help one another.

With the recognition that neighborhoods may be isolated for several days following a major disaster, the Seattle Office of Emergency Management (OEM) began working with community members in a few areas of the city to help develop or support efforts for emergency preparedness planning at the District or larger Community level. Starting with three communities -- West Seattle, Queen Anne/Magnolia and Wallingford – and with the help of Council funding in the 2009 budget, emergency preparedness plans were developed centered on the establishment of pre-identified community gathering locations referred to as “**Emergency Communication Hubs**”.

Current Status of the Hub Initiative

Hub Concept

The concept behind the “Hub” pilot initiative is to improve the readiness of communities to respond to the variety of needs that will arise in the aftermath of a major disaster. Hubs are pre-designated meeting places that are staffed by neighborhood volunteers. Immediately following a major event volunteers respond to the Hub sites to begin assessing the extent of damage. As individuals conduct personal and block assessments, the Hub becomes a central location where information and resources can

be shared and distributed. In addition, via radios, Hub volunteers can talk to one another and also have the capability of establishing a two-way communication link with the City of Seattle Emergency Operating Center (EOC). This allows residents to convey information to the EOC regarding the neighborhood infrastructure and safety of the residents in real time, and provide residents with information from the City that can be shared throughout the area. Hubs empower residents to become individually prepared, encourage collaboration between neighborhood groups and strengthen coordination with the City's emergency communication systems.

Hub Leadership

In an effort to unify and build consistency in the development of Hubs, a grass-roots Leadership Team has been established and is made up of representatives from each community that has either identified Hub locations or is looking at the Hub concept. Currently the group includes representatives from West/Southwest, Queen Anne/Magnolia/Interbay, Wallingford, Fremont, Broadview and Capitol Hill. In addition to building the consistency of the Hubs, this Leadership Team determined that they wanted to have opportunities to bring community members together who are either Hub volunteers or who are generally interested in community preparedness. With this idea in mind the Leadership Team has hosted three Preparedness Summits and has a fourth one scheduled for late September. Hubs staffed by community volunteers have also participated in three Auxiliary Communication Services (ACS) field exercises with a fourth exercise planned for this fall. They have also held a table top exercise where they tested how the identified volunteer staff positions would assist community members in matching local needs with local resources as well as how information from the community would be communicated to the City. This Leadership Team has been instrumental in sustaining the momentum of interest and attracting new neighborhoods.

Lessons Learned to Date

Experience to date with this initiative suggests that the development of the community "Hubs", as they are currently scoped, requires a dedicated group of local volunteers who are willing to not only develop an emergency preparedness plan for their area, but are also willing to promote the importance of the Hub within their community. Each of these groups has undertaken an outreach effort toward to promote the Hubs and recruit volunteers who will respond and take on pre-identified roles ranging from Hub manager, greeter, message-taker to radio operator. It is also clear from outreach efforts that not all communities currently have the organization in place to support Hubs as identified above, which requires a significant number of volunteers for both planning and staffing.

We have also seen that seed funding received from the Council and through Department of Neighborhoods' grants has been very helpful to support these planning efforts. It has enabled the neighborhood groups to create information materials, buy equipment, etc., which adds to the momentum.

Expansion Plans

Thanks to the enthusiasm of the existing Hub Leadership Team and active outreach efforts by OEM over the last two years, several other neighborhoods have begun similar efforts. Capitol Hill has identified three Hubs and is using DON Matching Funds for equipment and outreach. Fremont has assumed responsibility for one of the Hubs originally identified by Wallingford (BF Day Park). Green Lake has identified four Hubs (two shared with Wallingford). Broadview is in the process of working on Hub development, but also wants to focus on personal and neighbor-to-neighbor preparedness efforts. The Ballard District Council has just formed a Committee to begin the Hub process. There is also a group in Northeast that has been working on the Neighborhood Gathering Space at the Hunter Farm location around 35th NE and 77th NE and plan to establish a Hub at this location. A number of community groups including Wedgewood, View Ridge, Ravenna/Bryant and Hawthorne Hills are viewing this as their central Hub.

Hub Concept Modification

Now that Hub planning is well underway in those areas of the city identified earlier, we plan to actively promote the idea in Central Southeast and Beacon Hill communities. Additionally, and with the recognition that not every neighborhood will have volunteers to replicate the full Hub concept, expansion effort will also include scaled-down options. As its core, a Hub is meant to be a place for neighbors to "help or be helped", so the idea of "Community Gathering Hubs" is going to be promoted along with the idea of "Emergency Communications Hubs". The idea of "Community Gathering Hubs" is that the community can pre-identify locations where people can go following a major disaster to help each other with needs and resources. The value of idea is supported by the experience in other parts of the world showing that following disasters people will naturally gather to find ways to help each other. The identification of a place in advance where people should meet takes away the confusion on where to go to either help or get help. This introductory step can be done without a large commitment of volunteer time or training.

Goals

The major goal for this Community Preparedness effort over the next 2 – 3 years is to have some level of a Hub in each of the City's 13 Neighborhood Districts and

within as many communities in these Districts as possible. We also plan to outreach to organizations such as the Sustainable and Faith communities to see if the idea of establishing Hubs can be built into their own organizational efforts.

Benefits to the City

In addition to empowering citizens to help one another after disasters, community-level emergency planning brings many benefits to the City, including:

- Establishes a pre-identified locations where community members can gather to assist one another using local resources to meet local needs
- Facilitates two-way communications between impacted neighborhoods and the City
- Helps the City deploy resources and services more efficiently with the knowledge of where citizens will gather
- Allows City responders to prioritize the most urgent needs, knowing that neighborhoods are more prepared to help themselves

Adding this level of preparedness in the City increases our readiness for disasters as well as increasing the awareness in the community that they will have a significant role in helping each other respond and recover from this type of disaster. These planning efforts also help promote preparedness at the personal, family, and immediate neighbor levels.